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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that clothing is a significant form of nonverbal communication that affects the perceptions of others. Fourth, seventh, and ninth graders (27 males and 33 females) from the Lincoln County Public Schools (Georgia) were shown three photographs of a female model in casual, moderate, and conservative attire. A modified Likert scale was used to measure student perceptions of eight teacher traits for each of the stimulus photographs. Results indicate that students' perceptions of teacher attributes are affected by teacher attire. In addition, different modes of dress tend to elicit certain perceptions while simultaneously decreasing the probability of other perceptions. Casual clothing was perceived by students to convey teacher friendliness, fairness, and interestingness. Moderate attire conveyed teacher friendliness, organization, interestingness, understanding, and discipline. Conservative dress elicited perceptions of teacher organization, knowledge, and disciplinary skills. Although differences in perceptions were evidenced at varying grade levels, no pattern of differing perceptions due to student gender emerged. (IAH)

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The Effect of Teacher Dress on Student Perceptions

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Abstract

We showed fourth, seventh, and ninth graders three photographs of a model in casual, moderate, and conservative attire. Then we measured student perceptions of eight teacher traits for each of the stimulus photographs. Casual clothing was shown to convey teacher friendliness, fairness, and interestingness. Moderate attire conveyed teacher friendliness, organization, interestingness, understanding, and discipline. Conservative dress elicited perceptions of teacher organization, knowledge, and disciplinary skills.

The Effect of Teacher Dress on Student Perceptions

The importance of a professional appearance in the business world has been emphasized in professional literature. The educational counterpart of the work force, however, has been virtually ignored in terms of the impact of teacher dress style. Although few studies have dealt specifically with the impact of teacher dress on student perceptions, several studies have established the relationships between an individual's dress style, his/her self-perception, and the perceptions of others (Aiken, 1963; Bickman, 1974; Buckley, 1983; Fischel & Valentine, 1984).

The impact of attractiveness on observers has been consistently confirmed by researchers (Buck & Tiene, 1989; Goebel & Cashen, 1979; Irilli, Kehle, & Guidubaldi, 1978). Attractiveness has been shown to be influenced by clothing (Buck & Tiene, 1989). Instructors perceived as attractive are expected to be more friendly, better organized, less apt to demand too much work, and generally better teachers than their less attractive colleagues (Irilli et al., 1978). Despite the positive characteristics attributed to attractive individuals, however, some

negative connotations exist as well. For example, attractive females tend to exhibit deferential chacteristics since they do not view themselves as sources of authority (Adams & Read, 1983). Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (cited in Buck & Tiene, 1989) indicated that attractive people are rated less likely to be responsible parents.

In spite of the few negative perceptions toward attractive individuals, attractive people generally are perceived to have more positive traits than are less attractive people. The negative view of society toward less attractive people extends to students' negative perceptions of unattractive teachers. Goebel and Cashen (1979) found that unattractive teachers are perceived to be less friendly, less organized, less likely to encourage interaction between students, and less likely to have high expectations of their students. The clothing one wears influences perceptions of others concerning one's personality traits.

One's clothing has a bearing on his/her nonverbal communication. Clothing cues others to the personal traits, habits, and competencies

of the wearer, and to the socioeconomic class and the probable occupational status of the wearer as well (Johnson, 1982). Style of dress functions as a principal determinant of one person's reaction to another (Bickman, 1974). Through clothing cues, it is possible for strangers to categorize an individual's status in society, and to respond to that individual in a socially appropriate manner (Linton, 1936). So strong is the influence of clothing cues on the perceiver's expectations that, according to Knapp (1972), "Lack of congruence in clothing cues creates suspicion or confusion in the mind of the perceiver" (p. 122).

Aiken (1963) found correlations between clothing choices of undergraduate women and various personality traits. His results suggest that subjects who used dress primarily as a decorative function tended to exhibit non-intellectual, conforming, and submissive traits. Those whose principal interest in dress was comfort were labeled as cooperative, self-controlled, and deferent to authority. Subjects whose dress choice was governed by economy,were perceived to be efficient, intelligent, and conscientious.

Thornton (1944) reported that persons who wore glasses were

judged to be significantly higher in intelligence, industriousness, and dependability than those who did not wear glasses. One aspect of this study concerned judgements of honesty based solely on the presence or absence of glasses. Thorton concluded that a photograph of a subject wearing glasses was perceived to represent a person who was significantly more honest than a person without glasses.

Just as personality traits may be signalled by clothing, the occupational status of an individual may be signalled as well. Johnson (1982) found that clothing was an indicator of occupational status, which he classified as "manual/nonmanual", "professional/working", and "white collar/blue collar" dichotomies. Horn (1968) noted that the terms "white collar" and "blue collar" are themselves significant terminology that correlate dress mode with occupational status. Form and Stone (cited in Johnson, 1982) indicated that high-status clothing was perceived to be aesthetically pleasing and multipurpose in nature rather than functional in nature. On the other hand, manual work clothing was perceived to be characterized by heavy, durable fabrics and to be single-purpose in nature. Johnson concluded that clothing carries a status that is transferred to the wearer.

Specific attire may command a measure of respect from observers; the general effect of a uniform has long been noted. Findings by Bickman (1974) revealed that the donning of a uniform significantly increased obedience among both male and female subjects of a wide age range. Uniformed persons are perceived to have a legitimate authority that is based in their attire. Bickman found that the requests of uniformed figures were likely to be carried out, regardless of their authority to personally mete out punishment or rewards. Lack of personal surveillance by the uniformed individual also had little effect on compliance.

The persuasive aspect of dress style was also studied by Lefkowitz, Blake, and Mouton in 1955. They found that pedestrians violated traffic light signals at a higher rate if the person ahead first violated the signal; moreover, when the person ahead was dressed to represent a high-statused individual, the rate of violations was significantly higher than when low-statused clothing was used.

Mills and Anderson (1965) provided further evidence on the impact of appearance on persuasion. According to their findings, attractively dressed individuals who overtly stated their intentions to persuade others

to their points of view increased their influence. When dressed to appear unattractive, however, an overtly stated desire to influence did not increase or decrease their effectiveness. Research by Buckley (1983) supported the contention that perceptions of physical attractiveness can be successfully manipulated by dress.

Although clothing cues yield viewer responses and interpretations, the cues may be distorted due to several factors. Horn (1968) asserts that observers tend to select only aspects of appearance that are considered relevant, and the selection may be embedded in the observer's expectations of the individual who is observed. Dubbed the "primacy effect" by Anderson (1965), first impressions tend to bias future perceptions of an individual. Information that contradicts the original assessment is likely to be ignored, while supporting evidence is acknowledged and assimilated (Goebel & Cashen, 1979). Other researchers, however, refute the endurance of the primacy effect. Buck and Tiene (1989) contend that perceptions are adjusted as an individual's personality is revealed. According to Knapp (1972), the higher the similarity between the observer and the observed, the higher the degree

of accuracy in judgement. Rozencrantz (1962) reported that the degree of clothing awareness is related to social class and verbal intelligence. Ignorance of clothing cues may be attributed to the specific situation in which the viewer observation is made (Knapp, 1972).

As evidenced by this review, clothing style significantly affects viewer perceptions. A few studies have been done in school settings. Molloy (1988) found that teacher dress style significantly affected student attitudes. He indicated that conservative clothing had a substantial, positive effect on both classroom discipline and the work habits of students. Although Molloy asserted that pupils of different socioeconomic levels respond differently to various kinds of clothing, he failed to elaborate on either the socioeconomic levels studied or the kinds of clothing stimuli used.

Rollman (1980) provided further evidence on the impact of teacher dress in his study involving college undergraduates. He concluded that teachers who dressed in conservative attire were perceived as more organized and knowledgeable, whereas informally dressed teachers were perceived as more friendly and flexible.

Wong (1990) suggests that some features of a teacher's dress style may prove distracting to students and lead to off-task behavior. Items targeted as highly distracting include body-hugging, intensely colored or flimsy garments. For female teachers, revealing attire such as low necklines, short skirts, high slits, and cut-in arm holes was deemed distracting, while distracting attire for males include dangling cuffs, pants worn too short, and the absence of socks.

An individual's outer physical appearance is generally believed to reflect a correspondingly similar inner quality. According to Irilli et al. (1978), the characteristics that are implied by a teacher's dress style may promote a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of the student regarding the student's expectations of success or failure in that teacher's classroom. Heinen, Derlaga, and Chaiken (cited in Irilli et al., 1978), however, suggest that while a teacher's appearance does influence student expectations, it does not significantly alter student performance.

As revealed by decades of research, clothing is an important form of nonverbal communication that affects perceptions of others. The purpose of our present research is to add to the knowledge base concerning the

impact of teacher dress on student perceptions.

METHOD

Subjects

We studied student perceptions of 27 males and 33 females from the Lincoln County (Georgia) school district. Subjects represented the elementary school level, the middle school level, and the high school. They were drawn randomly from heterogeneous homerooms at the fourth, seventh, and ninth grade levels.

Procedure

We showed each subject three photographs of a female model attired in three distinct modes of dress. The decision to use a female model was based on the fact that over 70 per cent of the teachers in the school system are females. The stimulus photographs represented conservative, moderate, and casual attire. Conservative attire consisted of a tailored navy suit worn with pumps. Moderate attire was represented by a pair of slacks, a pullover sweater, and a scarf. Casual attire consisted of jeans, a tee shirt, and athletic shoes. In order to isolate the effect of dress style

from the possible interference of other variables, all aspects of the photograph were held constant with the exception of clothing. The same model duplicated the same pose for each set. The facial expression of the model was uniformly composed in each photograph, and an identical background was used.

We administered an instrument designed to assess each of the stimulus photographs. In responding to the instrument, a modified Lickert-type scale, subjects rated each photograph by indicating "agree", "neutral", or "disagree" on each of eight perception items. The perception items involved the eight teacher traits of friendliness, organization, fairness, interesting, understanding, knowledge, discipline, and well-informed.

Scores were obtained by the assignment of points for each response: three points were assigned for "agree", two points were assigned for "neutral", and one point was assigned for "disagree". Each item was analyzed separately.

Statistical Analysis

We performed a 2 (student gender: male, female) x 3 (grade level: fourth, seventh, ninth) x 3 (dress: casual, moderate, conservative) between-between-within mixed design analysis of variance on the scores for each of the eight items. The within-subjects variable was dress, because each student rated each of the three dress styles.

RESULTS

We found that teacher dress style significantly affects student perception. We measured student perceptions of eight teacher traits. The means and standard deviations for the perception items are shown in Table 1. Table 2 presents the *F* ratios for each of the eight ANOVAs.

Item 1. "This teacher is friendly."

Group means and standard deviations for Item 1 are shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, the main effect due to type of dress was significant. Tukey's (a) tests showed that casual dress and moderate dress received significantly higher ratings for teacher friendliness than did

conservative dress.

The interaction between grade level and type of dress also was significant. Specific comparisons with Tukey's (a) tests showed that fourth graders gave significantly higher ratings to casual dress over both conservative dress and moderate dress; however, seventh graders rated both moderate dress and casual dress significantly higher than conservative dress. Moderate dress was rated significantly higher by seventh graders than by either fourth graders or ninth graders. No other significant main effects or interactions were found for Item 1.

Item 2. "This teacher is organized."

For this perception item, the main effect due to type of dress was significant. Tukey's (a) tests showed that conservative dress and moderate dress both received significantly higher ratings than did casual dress.

The interaction between grade level and type of dress also was significant. Specific comparisons indicated that seventh graders gave significantly higher ratings to both conservative and moderate dress over casual dress, and they rated conservative dress significantly higher than

did fourth graders. Similarly, ratings of conservative dress were significantly higher at the ninth grade level than at the fourth grade level. Ninth graders rated conservative dress significantly higher than casual dress for the attribute of teacher organization. Casual dress was rated significantly higher by fourth graders than by seventh graders. No other significant main effects or interactions were found for student perceptions of teacher organization.

Item 3. "This teacher is fair towards students."

As shown in Table 2, type of dress significantly affected student perceptions of teacher fairness. Casual dress was rated significantly higher than conservative dress for this attribute. Grade level also yielded significant results, with seventh graders giving significantly higher ratings than those given by ninth graders.

The interaction between grade level and student sex was significant also. Specific comparisons showed that seventh grade females gave significantly higher ratings for fairness than did ninth grade females, but the ratings of males showed no significant differences among the three grade levels. No other significant main effects or interactions were found.

Item 4. "This teacher is interesting."

As revealed in Table 2, student perception concerning this item was significantly affected by type of teacher dress. Specific comparisons (Tukey's (a) tests) indicated that both casual and moderate attire received significantly higher ratings than conservative attire for this item.

The interaction between grade level and student sex was significant as well. Specific comparisons showed that, while fourth grade females rated the item significantly higher than their male peers, the converse was true at the ninth grade level, with males rating the item significantly higher than females. Ninth grade males also gave significantly higher ratings for this item than did fourth grade males. No other significant main effects or interactions were found for this item.

Item 5. "This teacher understands student problems."

For student perceptions concerning this item, the only significant main effect was due to type of dress. Moderate dress received significantly higher ratings than did conservative dress. No other main effects or interactions were significant for this item.

Item 6. "This teacher is knowledgeable."

Student perceptions of teacher knowledge was affected by teacher style of dress. The interaction between grade level and student sex was significant. Ratings for seventh grade females were significantly higher than ratings for seventh grade males.

The interaction between grade level and type of dress also was significant. Fourth graders gave significantly higher ratings to casual dress than to moderate dress, whereas seventh graders gave significantly higher ratings ratings to conservative dress than to casual dress. No other significant main effects or interactions were found.

Item 7. "This teacher has good classroom discipline."

For student perception concerning classroom discipline, we found a significant interaction between grade level and type of dress. Seventh graders gave significantly higher ratings to both conservative dress and moderate dress, as compared to casual dress. Further comparisons showed that fourth graders, as well as ninth graders, rated casual significantly higher than did seventh graders. Also, seventh graders rated conservative dress significantly higher than did fourth graders. No other main effects

or interactions were significant for this item.

Item 8. "This teacher is well-informed about the subject she teaches."

Item 8 was the only item for which no significant main effects or interactions were found. These results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

DISCUSSION

Results of this study support the contention that students' perceptions of teacher attributes are affected by teacher attire. Moreover, different modes of dress tend to elicit certain perceptions while simultaneously decreasing the probability of other perceptions.

It appears that a casual mode of dress conveys teacher friendliness, fairness, and the ability to arouse student interest. Because students themselves dress informally, a casually dressed teacher may be perceived

as being similar to themselves, not only in clothing style but in other ways as well. Students might expect casually attired teachers to approach them more closely in terms of age and experience, and consequently expect them to relate better to student attitudes.

Casual dress received lower ratings than either moderate or conservative dress for the assessment of teacher organization and discipline skills. Again, the semblance between student dress and informal teacher dress may strengthen the perception of similarity between teacher and student, resulting in a lack of confidence in teacher organizational and managerial skills.

Casual attire was favored by fourth graders as representing a more friendly and knowledgeable teacher. Fourth grade was the only grade to rate the casually dressed model as being significantly more knowledgeable than either of the more formally dressed models. Moreover, fourth graders rated the organizational skills of the casually dressed model significantly higher than did seventh graders. Conversely, conservative clothing received consistently low ratings from fourth

graders. Both seventh and ninth graders gave the conservatively dressed model significantly higher ratings than fourth graders when estimating teacher organizational skills.

While the casually dressed model received high ratings for the traits of friendliness, fairness, and interestingness, the moderately dressed model received high ratings for friendlinessand interestingness, as well as for organization, understanding, and disciplinary skills. The moderately dressed model was judged to be more organized than the casually dressed model at the seventh grade level. Seventh graders also perceived the moderately dressed model as being a better disciplinarian than her casually dressed counterpart. Further confirmation of seventh graders' favor towards moderate teacher dress is evidenced by their higher ratings of the moderately dressed model over both fourth and ninth graders when assessing teacher friendliness. The moderately dressed model was judged to be both more interesting and more understanding than the conservatively dressed model.

Of the three types of clothing assessed, the moderately dressed

model received the greatest number of significant differences reflecting the most diverse set of attributes. Moderate dress appears to allow the retention of friendliness and interestingness without a corresponding negation of organizational and disciplinary skills. In addition to the other attributes conveyed by moderate dress is the perception of teacher understanding, a trait not shared by either of the two models.

As did moderate attire, conservative dress conveyed perceptions of teacher organization and disciplinary skills. Unlike either casual or moderate dress, however, conservative dress elicited a perception of teacher knowledge, which was significant at the seventh grade level. Seventh graders also found conservative attire to signify strong organizational skills of the wearer, as did ninth graders.

Disciplinary skills were perceived to be a strength of the conservatively clothed model. This was evidenced particularly by the ratings given by seventh graders.

Conservative dress received lower scores than either of the other two modes of dress for the traits of friendliness and interestingness.

Typically, conservative attire is diametrically opposed to the attire chosen by many students, and may impart an image of maturity and wisdom to the wearer. These traits appear to decrease the images of friendliness and interestingness, however.

Results of this study indicate the strength of the impact of teacher dress on student perceptions. While differences in perceptions were evidenced at varying grade levels, no pattern of differing perceptions due to student gender emerged. This study does not answer the question of whether the results would be similar if a male model had been used.

An awareness of the influence of teacher dress at different times in the educational process will allow educators to make intelligent choices in developing a professional wardrobe. The conscious manipulation of student attitudes through dress style can lead to a more positive learning climate in the classroom.

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Table 1. Group Means and Standard Deviations

Grade 4						
Type of Dress	Casual	Casual	Moderate	Moderate	Conservative	Conservative
Sex of Student	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Response Item						
1(Friendly)	2.70	2.90	2.10	2.50	2.00	2.20
	(.67)	(.32)	(.74)	(.71)	(.91)	(.63)
2(Organized)	2.60	2.70	2.80	2.10	2.50	2.10
	(.70)	(.18)	(.42)	(.70)	(.71)	(.52)
3(Fair)	2.30	2.70	2.30	2.30	1.70	2.20
	(.82)	(.48)	(.67)	(.48)	(.82)	(.63)
4(Interesting)	2.50	2.70	2.10	2.30	1.50	2.60
	(.85)	(.48)	(.70)	(.82)	(.71)	(.52)
5(Understanding)	2.70	2.50	2.30	2.70	2.10	2.30
	(.48)	(.53)	(.95)	(.48)	(.71)	(.67)
6(Knowledgeable)	2.60	2.80	2.30	2.10	2.20	2.10
	(.70)	(.42)	(.67)	(.74)	(.79)	(.52)
7(Discipline)	2.60	2.50	2.50	2.20	2.00	2.30
	(.81)	(.53)	(.71)	(.63)	(.82)	(.48)
8(Well-Informed)	2.70	2.40	2.40	2.30	1.70	2.60
	(.67)	(.70)	(.70)	(.67)	(.95)	(.70)
Grade 7						
1(Friendly)	2.75	2.63	2.92	2.88	1.92	1.75
	(.45)	(.64)	(.29)	(.35)	(.51)	(.46)
2(Organized)	2.00	2.50	2.83	2.50	3.00	3.00
	(.60)	(.53)	(.39)	(.53)	(.00)	(.00)
3(Fair)	2.58	2.38	2.67	2.63	2.17	2.38
	(.51)	(.74)	(.49)	(.52)	(.58)	(.71)
4(Interesting)	2.25	2.63	2.67	2.75	2.08	1.88
	(.75)	(.74)	(.49)	(.46)	(.67)	(.64)
5(Understanding)	2.50	2.38	2.75	2.63	2.00	2.25
	(.67)	(.74)	(.45)	(.52)	(.74)	(.46)
6(Knowledgeable)	2.42	2.13	2.67	2.13	3.00	2.75
	(.67)	(.64)	(.49)	(.64)	(.00)	(.46)
7(Discipline)	1.83	1.88	2.42	2.25	3.00	2.75
	(.58)	(.33)	(.51)	(.46)	(.00)	(.40)
8(Well-Informed)	2.33	2.38	2.67	2.50	2.75	2.75
	(.65)	(.74)	(.49)	(.53)	(.45)	(.46)
Grade 9						
1(Friendly)	2.67	2.64	2.33	2.38	2.11	2.18
	(.71)	(.67)	(.71)	(.81)	(.78)	(.87)
2(Organized)	2.78	2.27	2.78	2.91	2.89	2.91
	(.67)	(.65)	(.44)	(.30)	(.33)	(.30)
3(Fair)	2.44	2.36	2.11	2.09	2.33	1.82
	(.73)	(.50)	(.93)	(.70)	(.71)	(.60)
4(Interesting)	2.78	2.45	2.56	2.18	2.67	2.18
	(.44)	(.52)	(.53)	(.60)	(.50)	(.60)
5(Understanding)	2.33	2.36	2.33	2.27	2.14	2.18
	(.50)	(.50)	(.71)	(.65)	(.53)	(.40)
6(Knowledgeable)	2.78	2.27	2.41	2.45	2.67	2.45
	(.44)	(.65)	(.73)	(.52)	(.50)	(.52)
7(Discipline)	2.56	2.55	2.56	2.27	2.56	2.45
	(.53)	(.52)	(.53)	(.65)	(.53)	(.69)
8(Well-Informed)	2.44	2.45	2.58	2.38	2.56	2.64
	(.53)	(.52)	(.53)	(.67)	(.53)	(.50)

Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 2. *F* - ratios of ANOVAs

Variable	Grade (A)	Sex (B)	Dress (C)	AxB	AxC	BxC	AxBxC
Response Item							
1 (Friendly)	<1	1.86	16.92**	<1	3.10*	<1	<1
2 (Organized)	2.70	2.32	5.36**	<1	4.06**	1.59	2.31
3 (Fair)	4.12*	<1	4.11*	3.22*	<1	<1	<1
4 (Interesting)	<1	<1	6.98**	5.63**	2.39	2.61	1.77
5 (Understanding)	<1	<1	3.56*	<1	1.27	<1	<1
6 (Knowledgeable)	<1	<1	2.43	3.64*	3.98**	<1	<1
7 (Discipline)	<1	<1	1.78	<1	8.19**	<1	<1
8 (Well-Informed)	1.95	<1	<1	<1	2.07	2.04	1.71

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$